

Tafelmusik

The Eloquent Cello

PROGRAM NOTES

By Allen Whear

DITTERSDORF SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN F MAJOR AFTER OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

Carl Ditters is one of the few masters of the Viennese classical school who was actually born in Vienna. He was well educated in non-musical subjects and established a solid reputation early on through his violin playing and increasingly popular compositions. He enjoyed the friendship of Gluck and Haydn, and was highly regarded by the Austrian emperor, the Prussian king, and numerous nobles in between. Eventually Ditters himself was ennobled, and after 1773 was referred to as “von Dittersdorf.” His informative and frequently amusing autobiography, dictated on his deathbed, ends on a poignant note, as he reveals his compromised health and poverty (similar to the way Boccherini spent his final days, and so unlike the fame and wealth enjoyed by his friend Haydn). Dittersdorf left a large catalogue of works in all the genres of his day, including opera and oratorio, but his instrumental works are the most performed today, especially those for unusual instruments such as double bass and harp.

Dittersdorf writes that around 1780 “it occurred to me to take some of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as subjects for characteristic symphonies.” He wrote twelve of them, and performed them in Vienna as a self-produced event, hoping to raise a significant sum of money. One of his biggest subscribers was Baron van Swieten (also a patron of C.P.E. Bach: see below). Six *Metamorphoses* symphonies survive in their original form. The fourth is inspired by the myth of Perseus rescuing Andromeda: after killing Medusa, and while flying over Africa, Perseus discovers the Ethiopian princess Andromeda, naked and chained to a rock. Her mother had unwisely boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids, or sea nymphs. A furious Poseidon sent a sea monster to wreak havoc along the coastline, and the only way to appease him was to sacrifice Andromeda. Falling in love with her at sight, Perseus kills the monster, frees her from bondage, and subsequently marries her. The opening **Adagio** is in effect an extended aria for oboe which would not seem out of place in an opera or ballet. The **Presto** evokes an image of Perseus flying with winged sandals. The **Larghetto**, in the mournful key of F minor, might depict the suffering of Andromeda. The **Finale** begins in *sturm und drang* mode (Perseus defeating the monster), then leads to a graceful minuet signifying the celebration of his triumph and marriage.

BOCCHERINI CELLO CONCERTO IN D MAJOR

In the history of cello playing, the unique contribution of Luigi Boccherini is universally acknowledged, yet he left no treatise, method, nor notable student. The legacy of his cello playing lies instead in his numerous sonatas and concertos, and in the concertante role—yielding nothing to the violin—that he gave the instrument in his voluminous output of chamber music. Of the thirteen or so known Boccherini cello concertos, only five were published during the composer’s lifetime. The last of these, the Concerto in D Major, G.483, was published in Vienna in 1784. Compared to earlier concertos, the **Allegro maestoso** demonstrates a richer, more varied orchestration. The opening tutti briefly quotes Gluck’s inferno music from *Don Juan*, a work Boccherini would have encountered, and likely performed, in Vienna. The **Andante lentarello** is unique in offering a fully written-out cadenza by the composer.



Luigi Boccherini playing the violoncello. Unknown artist.
(c. 1764–1767)

C.P.E. BACH SYMPHONY FOR STRINGS IN B MINOR

The Dutch diplomat and amateur musician Baron Gottfried van Swieten is remembered for his role in introducing the music of J.S. Bach to Mozart, as well as his contributions to Haydn’s *Creation*. While serving as ambassador in Berlin, he became enamoured with the symphonies of C.P.E. Bach, and commissioned a set of six symphonies for strings, which appeared in 1773. Bach’s writing is “outside the box” of the Viennese symphonic tradition, and his unique language is highly expressive, occasionally quirky, and always entertaining.

His writing for the upper strings in the Symphony in B Minor is typically brilliant and powerful while not being specially idiomatic; unlike the other composers on this program, this Bach never mastered a string instrument!

HAYDN CELLO CONCERTO IN C MAJOR

In 1761, **Joseph Haydn** was appointed *Vice-Capellmeister* to the court of Prince Paul Anton Esterházy. This was the beginning of a three-decades long relationship with the Esterházy dynasty. Although nominally ranked under the aging *Capellmeister* Gregor Werner, Haydn was put in charge of the orchestra from the start, directly engaged in hiring musicians to expand and improve the small resident orchestra, which it is thought he led from the second violin desk. His compositions from this early stage, such as concertos and symphonies with extended solos, demonstrate great confidence in the abilities of the individual musicians, and must have flattered and ingratiated his new colleagues. These included virtuosos such as concertmaster Luigi Tomasini and cellist Joseph Weigl. The latter was appointed just a few weeks after Haydn, and the two became close friends: Haydn stood as godfather to two of Weigl's children. The cellist's playing most certainly inspired Haydn's Concerto in C Major. No record survives of a first performance of the work, but the first movement's principal theme is recorded in Haydn's *Entwurf-Katalogue* (sketch catalogue) from the time.

For 200 years, this sleeping beauty disappeared, until it was found in an anonymous manuscript in Prague in 1962, an event hailed by musicologist H.C. Robbins-Landon as "the greatest musicological discovery since the Second World War." The entry in Haydn's catalogue, plus the evident high quality of the work, made authentication swift, and the modern premiere took place in May of that year by Milos Sadlo in Prague. Since then its reputation has grown to one of the finest cello concertos of the eighteenth century, and indeed one of the best concertos for any instrument from this early classical period. Resting in amber, so to speak, throughout the nineteenth century, it avoided the mutilations and romanticized editing endured by Haydn's later Concerto in D Major (as published by Gevaert) and Boccherini's famous Concerto in B-flat Major (as published by Grützmacher).

A courtly atmosphere is established in the stately **Moderato**. The **Adagio** exploits the cello's singing qualities, and Haydn uses a trick favored by Boccherini: the solo melody emerges from a quietly sustained note, making a sort of "secret entrance." The **Finale** abounds in Haydn's energetic humor and unrestrained virtuosity, making full use of advanced techniques, such as thumb-position, and exploiting the full range of the cello. The Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma once likened the tension in the solo cello's opening note to a "cat watching a mouse hole."